

Multilingual Communication During a Pandemic: Tips for Healthcare Providers

Whenever a crisis arises, healthcare providers must be prepared for the challenges of communicating in multiple languages. By addressing the needs of limited English proficiency (LEP) patients, healthcare providers can mitigate risk, improve patient care¹ and comply with relevant laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.²

Who is a person with limited English proficiency?

A person who does not speak English as their primary language or who has a limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English well is considered Limited English Proficient.

More than 25 million Americans speak English “less than very well,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau.³ This segment of the population is often at a higher risk of adverse outcomes⁴ and drug complications.⁵

Tips for Communicating with LEPs During an Emergency or Pandemic

Here are some tips for communicating in multiple languages with LEP patients and stakeholders during a crisis or pandemic.

1. Identify Specific Languages and Dialects Spoken in Your Area

The first step is to identify the most spoken languages outside of English in your area. The Census Bureau reports at least 350 languages are spoken in US homes,⁶ but that’s a lot of languages, so you’ll need to narrow them down to the most spoken languages in your locale. This information can be found by accessing your state and local demographic data, available through the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), as well as through the interactive map created by the [Department of Education](#). Both are useful for drilling down to the most spoken languages likely to be spoken by LEPs in your community.

2. Communicate with Patients during Emergency Situations with a Professional Medical Interpreter

A significant proportion of care, whether during a pandemic or otherwise, relies heavily on verbal communication. That’s why it is important for healthcare providers to have interpretation services available in order to bridge the language divide with LEP patients. Trained bilingual staff, on-staff interpreters and contract interpreters are all ideal to have in place, but not all providers have the financial resources to staff across multiple languages. Therefore, a growing number partner with language service providers like Language Link to get access to an entire suite of language services on an as needed basis. Such partnerships grant access to hundreds of languages that even the largest healthcare providers could never staff for, spanning the alphabet of language accessibility, from Albanian to Zulu.

Interpretation is accessed Over-the-Phone, which is ideal when social distance protocols are in place like in the case of the Coronavirus pandemic. Interpreters are also available via Video Remote or can be dispatched On-Site when needed. This flexibility helps medical teams communicate with patients before, during and after medical procedures. While partnering with a language service provider well in advance of an epidemic is preferred, if you do need this service in a pinch for the very first time,— language service providers that have capacity to scale like Language Link can gladly accommodate your needs.

3. Translate Your Written Communications into Multiple Languages

When it comes to informing patients or the community at large via social media and website updates, poster campaigns, infographics and so much more, you’ll want these to reach LEPs too. Professional translation into languages such as Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese, or the most spoken languages in your region, can help mitigate risk by reducing any potentially incorrect information from being disseminated. Many providers have established workflows with their language service provider wherein they hand off their files for translation, and after an efficient and rigorous quality

control process, they receive the translated files back, fully formatted and localized. And because time is of the essence during a pandemic, you'll want to work with a professional translation company that is sensitive to deadlines and can expedite orders, so that you are able to publish communications in a timely manner.

4. Make Multilingual Communication Part of Your Protocol

Timely and thoughtful multilingual communication at every step of an emergency pandemic can prevent ineffective, fear-driven, and potentially harmful information from being disseminated to the LEP community. Therefore, you'll want to continue to address LEPs with every wave of communication. And because emergencies and disasters often come unexpectedly, you'll want to have a multilingual communication protocol in place well in advance. This includes having interpreters available both via phone and in-person, as well as the ability to hand-off your written notifications and crisis-related content for fast turnaround. Making "multilingual" a part of your communication protocol can help mitigate risk and ensure you communicate with a much larger segment of the population for an overall improved outcome.

5. Be Mindful of Acronyms

The medical and scientific communities, like many fields, tend to use acronyms when communicating complex and industry-specific information. Be mindful of acronyms in your communications, especially when you plan to translate, and try to spell them out or avoid them when possible. If you must use health or scientific acronyms, discuss them in advance with your translation or interpretation team. A language service company can help guide you through both the general best practices and conventions specific to the language(s) your emergency notifications will be communicated in. It may surprise you to find that some acronyms are actually best left in English.

About Language Link

At Language Link we speak your patient's language. We've partnered with hospitals, clinics and healthcare providers for nearly three decades, providing comprehensive and customized translation solutions and interpretation services. We provide access to over 240 languages 24/7, covering virtually all languages encountered in hospital settings in the United States. We match our linguists' medical expertise to the specific needs of each project. We are HIPAA certified. Learn more by visiting <https://www.language.link/>

Sources:

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